

FEATURES

In spite of enemy fire, Oregon Soldiers refuse to leave downed comrades

We're not leaving you brother

Story and photos by John Bruning,
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The two Oregon National Guard CH-47 Chinook helicopters roared between saw tooth ridges of the Hindu Kush Mountains, bound for a remote NATO outpost under enemy attack. Each Chinook carried two pilots, two door gunners, a flight engineer and half a platoon of Polish infantry assigned to reinforce the beleaguered garrison.

September 18, 2010. Election Day, Logar Province, Eastern Afghanistan.

The hundred-foot long Chinooks seemed like toys compared to the sprawling backdrop of treeless, rock-strewn mountains that peaked above their rotor blades.

The four pilots, chief warrant officers Joe Speal and Eric West in 262, Kyle Evarts and Anson Smith in 073, had received this mission while out on election morning flying Afghani soldiers to isolated villages to help protect the polling sites.

The new task would not be an easy one. To get to the outpost required taking the Chinooks to 15,000 feet without oxygen.

The two ship flight sped through the mountain range, then broke out into the clear over a dry lake bed that stretched for miles. On the other side, ridgelines over twelve thousand feet high awaited.

For the combined Washington and Oregon air crews of Pendleton and Fort Lewis-based Bravo, 1-168 Aviation, the rugged countryside adds complexity to an already difficult mission, one in which their services are in great demand 24/7.

Once again, an element of the Oregon National Guard has found a spot center stage during a climactic time in the War on Terror.

Afghanistan is a country without a robust road network. Supplying far-flung NATO bases with vehicular convoys is simply not possible. Blackhawk helicopters abound, but at the high altitudes of Eastern Afghanistan they can't carry many troops or supplies.

In this mountainous environment, the Chinooks shine.

Capable of carrying everything from trucks slung under their hulls to ten thousand pounds of food, water, weapons and ammunition, the CH-47 is the delivery system that keeps the outlying NATO bases in the fight.

During the run up before the election, the Chinooks had flown American and Afghani soldiers, officials and ballots into isolated villages all over the Logar Province.

These teams then established polling locations and protected them from Taliban attack. For the Pacific Northwesterners, the election became a case study of democracy by air assault. Without their helicopters,



the people of this rural and impoverished province would not have had a voice in the political process.

As the two Chinooks reached the last set of mountains before their destination, Eric West began to climb for more altitude.

In his civilian life, West works for Boeing in the Seattle area and is also a flight instructor. In his younger days, he once found a job as an announcer in a strip club to help pay his college bills. He sometimes uses his "announcer voice" over the radio to provide a little levity.

Beside him sat 262's pilot-in-command, Joe Speal. A native of Georgia, forty-seven year old Speal has spent over two decades in Army aviation and is currently on his second consecutive combat tour in Afghanistan. Capable and experienced, his knowledge of the local area has been invaluable to the freshly arrived Guardsmen.

As West climbed 262 above 12,000 feet, the Chinook suffered catastrophic mechanical failure. The oil temperature gauge began to spike.

The flight engineer, Staff Sergeant Jerrik Haman, whipped out a screwdriver and opened a panel over the helicopter's loading ramp to see if he could detect the problem. Coils of smoke spun out of the compartment to fill the aircraft with the stench of burning oil.

In the cockpit, Speal smelled the smoke and knew they were in trouble. The Chinook's aft transmission system was starting to fail, causing the oil circulating in it to overheat. In such failures, the oil can ignite.

"We were sixty seconds from catching fire," Speal said later.

Speal turned to West, "Land this aircraft now." The Washington native rolled the CH-47 into a fifty degree diving bank.

"The aircraft essentially free-falls at that angle," West remarked.

In thirty seconds, the helicopter dropped almost two thousand two hundred feet as 262's nose came around in a 180 degree turn.

Fortunately, the lake bed was not far away. At five hundred feet, he leveled the helicopter and dropped

it onto the parched Afghan soil. In seconds, Sneal shut the engines down even as the Poles in back poured off the ramp to establish a protective perimeter around the crippled aircraft.

Overhead, Kyle Evarts, a regular army pilot, and Anson Smith, an Oregon National Guardsman who drills out of Pendleton, orbited 262 to provide cover with their three machine guns.

Evarts, a highly experienced active army aviator, radioed for help. A nearby Apache gunship pilot on another mission responded and told the Guardsmen that he and his gunner were on the way.

As the downed crew waited, curious villagers began to gather around the landing site. Evarts and Smith made low passes over them in an attempt to get them to keep their distance.

A few minutes later, they touched down and reinforced the security perimeter with their load of Polish infantry.

These were critical moments. Without the firepower an Apache can provide, the men on the ground were terribly vulnerable to a sudden enemy attack.

It took thirteen minutes for the Apache to arrive. "Longest thirteen minutes of my life," West quipped.

When at last the Apache reached the area, Evarts radioed the gunship's crew to ask, "How much fuel do you have?"

The Apache pilot didn't hesitate. He keyed his mic, "Doesn't matter. We're not leaving you, Brother."

On the ground, West and Speal breathed a sigh of relief. There would be no *Blackhawk Down* scenario this day.

The Taliban are simply too fearful of the Apache's rockets, missiles and 30mm automatic cannon to brave an assault with one overhead.

As a result, the relationship between



Left: 262 sits on the ground while crewmembers pull security, waiting for air support.

Above: Chief Warrant Officer 3 Joel Speal and Sgt. 1st Class DJ Jensen (in the background), await air support in the shade of 262.

Below center: Air cover arrives in the form of an Apache gunship.

Chinook and Apache crews is particularly close.

"It is a brotherhood. They are angels on our shoulders," noted Bravo Company's commanding officer, Pendleton native Captain John Hoffman. "They are always there watching out for us."

Meanwhile, every helicopter and aircraft in the area streaked to 262's assistance.

A quick reaction force of American troops from Task Force Brawler's "Ground Combat Platoon" arrived to join the perimeter, along with a Downed Aircraft Recovery Team that included mechanics from 1-168 reached the area to assess what repairs would be needed.

Toward dusk, a special field repair unit flew in from Bagram Air Force Base to work fourteen hours straight in freezing weather to get 262 back into the air.

They extracted the burnt transmission and replaced it with a new one. A relief crew stayed with the aircraft despite the subzero temperature, sharing one sleeping bag for the five aviators in an effort to keep warm.

At dawn the next morning, 262 returned home. The incident did not slow the pace of operations here at all. The Chinooks and its aviators went right back into the air that morning.

That's the way things work here in RC-East as the surge reaches its climax. These birds and their accomplished, professional crews are needed to sustain the fight.

"We can't do this job without them," acknowledged Colonel Don Galli, the 3rd Combat Aviation Brigade's commanding officer. Right now, Bravo Company is the only Guard element of the 3rd Combat Aviation Brigade.

Despite the scare, there was work to be done.

"We continue mission," West said as he grabbed his gear in the hours after his emergency landing.

In one two week period, West has been shot at with a rocket propelled grenade, forced down by engine failure, then flew into a landing zone that had been mortared and rocketed by the enemy.

Looking back on those tense moments over the Hindu Kush, West said, "This was the most significant event I've experienced in a Chinook. God was with us in the cockpit that day."

West strapped on his helmet and rejoined his crew. Together these aerial brothers and sisters flew back into the fight.

About the Author: John Bruning is an aviation and military writer who has authored or co-authored sixteen books. He embedded with a detachment of Bravo Company, 1-168 Aviation, Oregon Army National Guard.

When the unit arrived in Afghanistan in August, one element under Captain John Hoffman was sent to FOB Shank. The rest of the company went to FOB Salerno. Bruning spent time at both FOBs, and wrote about his experiences on his blog at: <http://theunawriterslair.typepad.com>.